

questions
de communication

Questions de communication

26 | 2014

La pornographie et ses discours

An Object of Discourse for Studies of Pornography

Marie-Anne Paveau and François Perea

Translator: Inist



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/9495>

DOI: 10.4000/questionsdecommunication.9495

ISSN: 2259-8901

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Lorraine

Printed version

Date of publication: 31 December 2014

ISBN: 978-2-8143-0233-4

ISSN: 1633-5961

Electronic reference

Marie-Anne Paveau and François Perea, « An Object of Discourse for Studies of Pornography », *Questions de communication* [Online], 26 | 2014, Online since 31 December 2014, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/9495>

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.

Tous droits réservés

An Object of Discourse for Studies of Pornography

Marie-Anne Paveau and François Perea

Translation : Inist

EDITOR'S NOTE

This English translation has not been published in printed form/Cette traduction anglaise n'a pas été publiée sous forme imprimée.

- 1 Pornography has been the subject of much recent discussion, particularly in France. It has become an everyday theme in media discourse as the numerous articles, special files and columns in the printed and online press demonstrate, as does the multiplication of "sex" features under various names in nearly all the French daily and weekly papers, on numerous radio stations and television channels¹. Pornography has also become a research subject and is now an integral part of humanities and social science studies in France², although it is new and somewhat controversial for some.

A recent object for sciences of discourse and communication

- 2 Pornography is rarely studied from a standpoint involving language, discourse and, more broadly, representations. This is the subject of this thematic issue devoted to the *discourse* of pornography in all senses of the term whether written, oral, techno-discursive, verbo-iconic, photographic or even, as we shall see, unconscious.
- 3 At first glance, pornography may seem to escape language and communications specialists given that everyone appears to agree that it is above all a matter of sexual organs, images, fluids or positions - bodies in a word. What is more, it would take a wise person to draw up exact borders between pornography, eroticism and sexuality - all fields

or activities which correspond to a single activity lacking in verblativity apart from shouts and moans namely making love. However someone well qualified to discuss the matter once said that "clearly it is when speaking that we make love" (Lacan, 1971-1972: 154). What Jacques Lacan meant was that language does things in reality and even to reality and also that sexuality firstly, and above all, functions through imagination before being put into form by language. This is exactly the aim of this thematic issue which describes the way in which words, phrases and discourse construct the universe of pornography (or to be more exact *pornographies*, given the heterogeneous and multiple nature of this cultural universe) whose links with sex, sexuality, eroticism and love are complex and tangled.

- 4 While sex is a longstanding object of research in literature, humanities and the social sciences including in a formal context, pornography is an almost totally new subject. In France, there is a long tradition of cataloguing sexual words derived from purism and the passionate attachment to language which is almost a national characteristic and is reflected by the impressive corpus dictionaries, lexicons and collections in all formats (Paveau, 2014: chapter 2). However, apart from this literature which could be put down to the sometimes humorous and risqué but always trendy "*esprit français*", there are hardly any spaces where people talk seriously about sex, particularly sex in its most spectacular and most disputed form - pornography. And yet, as early as 1984 in the United States, the anthropologist and militant feminist Gayle Rubin (1984: 136) had declared that "*the time has come to think about sex*". Here "to think about sex" (and not of sex as fashionable French society does) first meant opening a field of study in the humanities and social sciences. However, for reasons that were political and ethical, social and cultural - humanist reasons in short - it meant supporting the idea that the subject of sex should not be hidden away or even shameful in American society and indeed elsewhere. It implied that work in the field of sex should be recognized (particularly in its pornographic form) and that sexual orientations, tastes and practices should be respected. Finally the phrase implied that pornography should no longer be controlled and debased by the mainly heterosexist *mainstream* industry but instead opened up to the creativity of plural sexualities and that pornography should at last be properly recognized as a rich, ancient and heterogeneous cultural form in its own right.

An English-speaking militant approach: *porn studies*

- 5 This militant approach led to the birth of *porn studies* in the United States at exactly the same time as another American researcher, Linda Williams, was studying pornographic films using a scientific approach. In this issue, Emilie Landais offers a detailed study of this movement but let us briefly recall the three main crucial landmarks in the history of the birth of studies of pornography in the English-speaking world - 1989, 2004 and 2013.
- 6 In 1989, a few years after Gayle Rubin's appeal, pornographic films became the object of *film studies* research in the seminal book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, by Linda Williams, professor of cinema and rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley (Williams, 1989). In a work which is as much a study of film as a feminist manifesto, the author essentially focuses on an analysis of the famous *Deep Throat* (1972) to show in particular how fellatio is a structuring motif in the pornographic genre in cinema. She demonstrates more generally that pornographic films enable a dividing line to be drawn between the obscene and pornography, between subjugation

and physical experiences. The notion of "*On/Scene*" in particular - which she found preferable to the idea of the "ob-scene", the basis of legislation on pornography in many countries including the United States - was to be developed in all her later work and paved the way for countless researchers to "think pornography", as Ruwen Ogien put it (2003), differently from the socio-moral perception of a transgressive and reprehensible form of exhibited sexuality³.

- 7 In 2004, following on from the emergence of the ideas from this book – reprinted in 1999 – and knowledge which was developing in universities and research circles crossed with militant feminist ideas, Linda Williams began directing a collective called *Porn Studies* mostly made up of articles by students who attended her seminars at Berkeley. *Porn studies* were thus born and, in the United States and Britain, became firmly anchored in the field of *cultural studies* from the 2000s onwards.
- 8 In 2013, another collective work, *The Feminist Porn Book* was published. This was an initiative driven by Tristan Taormino in particular - an American author, journalist, filmmaker and sex counsellor who promoted pornography made by women in the feminist *proporn* or *sex positive* movement launched by its now legendary pioneers Annie Sprinkle, Candida Royalle, Betty Dodson, Scarlot Harlot or Veronica Vera. This collection is a seminal work in the field of *porn studies* which enables us to understand what is happening currently in both pornography and feminism and also to grasp the links and interlinking flows between the discourse, practices and sexual representations in three inter-related areas - pornography, sexology and prostitution.
- 9 The last manifestation of the growing vitality and legitimization in the English-speaking sector of this field is a British journal - the first to be entirely devoted to the question - soberly entitled *Porn Studies*, founded by Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith and brought out by the prestigious publishers Taylor & Francis (Attwood, Smith 2014).

The "*à la française*" way of dealing with words, texts and representations

- 10 In France, historically the fields of philosophy (essentially Ruwen Ogien, Beatriz Preciado, Michela Marzano, Dany-Robert Dufour) and sociology (particularly Marie-Helene Bourcier, Patrick Baudry, Mathieu Trachman, Daniel Welzer-Lang, Baptiste Coulmont) have produced works on pornography even though the *studies of pornography* label (a possible translation of *porn studies*⁴) has not become generally accepted or even desired. It is indeed significant (unless it is instead a symptom) that the first report on the question in French, by François-Ronan Dubois (2014) – one of the authors of this thematic issue – is entitled "*Introduction aux*" Porn Studies instead of the author's original choice "*Études pornographiques*" (Dubois, 2014).
- 11 In the area of literary, the now classic study by Jean-Marie Goulemot, *Ces livres que l'on ne lit que d'une main* ("*Books that are one-handed reading*") was published as early as 1994 while the discourse analysis provided by the linguist Dominique Maingueneau in *La littérature pornographique*, published in 2007 remains fairly classical in its approach, making no reference to works in English.
- 12 French linguistics is currently interested in the question which is demonstrated by the fact that the coordinators of this issue have each published works thereon using empirical, authentic and fictional corpora as a basis. Marie-Anne Paveau (2014) has just

published an overview, *Le discours pornographique* (Editions de la Musardine) which deals with lexical matters, text and discourse, feminist and militant arguments and digital discourse. Meanwhile, in several important recent articles, François Perea (2006, 2012, 2013) has dealt with questions of categories and tags, verbal interactions, cries and exclamations.

- 13 Information and communication sciences have also worked dynamically on this subject. Stephanie Kunert's research (2009, 2013) into female pornographers from a gender studies perspective has helped increase knowledge of *porn studies* in France. The pornographic press has been studied by Beatrice Damian-Gaillard (2012) who contributes to the current issue on this very subject. The thesis by Emilie Landais mentioned above, *L'émergence des études de pornographie en France*, was started in 2011 and will provide important historical and epistemological elements to help understand the construction of "pornography" as an object in the French-speaking humanities and social sciences. There are also more indirectly linked works covering related objects like the "chic porno" and "sexual advertising" mentioned in Esther Loubradou's thesis (2013) in the context of a broader study of a discourse of the "sexualization" or "pornographization" (the word "pornification" has also been seen) of society.
- 14 The terrain of pornography is therefore actively covered throughout the humanities and social sciences in France as is demonstrated by the quasi-simultaneous publication of several collective works over the last two years, mainly by young researchers in the field of philosophy - an issue of the digital journal *Proteus*, entitled "*Pornographies: entre l'animal and la machine*" (Athanasopoulos, Dejean, 2013); a special issue of *Rue Descartes*, a Collège international de philosophie journal dedicated to post-pornography, "*Pour un autre porno*" (Odello, 2014); a special file on the *nonfiction.fr* site, "*Penser le porno aujourd'hui*" (Bourlez, Gaudin, 2013). Analysis of discourse, linguistics, information and communication sciences and philosophy⁵ - we are currently witnessing the creation of a real field in France, almost certainly facilitated by the fortunate development of gender studies which has opened up new potential scientific avenues which were previously closed off by the heavy academicism of research.
- 15 Among these authors, some subscribe to a feminist or *queer* but always militant paradigm while others see pornography in more academic terms as a subject for study and therefore the label *porn studies* cannot be applied to all French works on pornography. However it should be noted that works linked to whatever extent to the American paradigm with an often militant gender studies outlook, and particularly those which study feminist post-pornographies, offer the most important sources of renewal, openness, creativity and liberation particularly on the political level. But whatever the direction - militant or more academic - adopted by researchers, the development of such research shows that pornography is now recognized as a veritable cultural form. This recognition backs up - if such were needed - the non-moral and non-stigmatizing position effectively summed up in Anne Sprinkle's famous remark: "*The solution to bad porn isn't no porn, it's better porn*".

Pornography, a cultural form in its own right

- 16 The coordinators of this thematic issue gathered the contributions that follow from this research landscape with the following objectives in mind:
- to contribute to knowledge in France of the paradigm of English-speaking *porn studies* (essentially American and English), particularly its feminist militant breeding ground, and also to promote works in France which subscribe to this English heritage or which are in the more ancient tradition of French and European works - a lineage which Jean-Marie Goulemot and Dominique Maingueneau represent quite well for example;
 - to present the discourse of and on pornography as a social discourse in its own right which is consequently endowed with a structuring function for representations of the public staging of sexuality but also, more generally, of the consumption of sex (sex work for example) or practice thereof (intimate, collective, public, semi-public, etc.);
 - to show that studies of pornography fully appertain to studies of discourse, texts and the media. The pornography industry is one of the essential driving forces behind new media and its productions therefore reveal trends which subsequently drive all discursive and more broadly media-based productions on social media for example. This is particularly the case of mediation or self-presentation and the construction of extimacy on the main digital social networks;
 - to reiterate the fact that pornographic discourse is in many ways a political discourse particularly regarding sex's social relations (feminist or alternative pornography, post-pornography) and the political dimension of the body and sensual emotions (public sexuality as a militant performance for example).
- 17 The French humanities and social sciences are very closely linked with their Brazilian counterparts particularly in the area of the theory of discourse. This thematic issue therefore includes a metaphorical sidestep towards Brazil which provides the possibility of decentring our standpoint and is based on press discourse.
- 18 The epistemological and generalist article by Emilie Landais opens this issue by giving an overview of English-speaking *porn studies* and studies of pornography "*à la française*". The author shows how these categories do not exist naturally but instead are scientific and institutional constructions in cultural terrains, each with their own specific feature and history.
- 19 Pornography's discursive locations are next explored by two articles on the written press, a study of film dialogues and an analysis of online casting audition videos. In "*L'économie politique du désir dans la presse pornographique hétérosexuelle masculine*", Beatrice Damian-Gaillard sketches out a cartography of the French male heterosexual pornographic press in terms of representations of sexuality, the cultural scripts proposed by the titles available on this market and editorial standpoints. In a study on a similar corpus in Brazil entitled "*Brazil sex magazine: un corps 100 % national?*", Monica Zoppi Fontana and Ilka de Oliveira Mota study the links between specific national features and pornography to grasp the main characteristics of a discourse of Brazilianity. Their aim here was to understand how this discourse influences the imaginary construction of the body of Brazilian women. The two subsequent articles leave the written world for interactional forms. In "*Éléments du pathos pornographique. Mise en scène et affects dans les dialogues de films pornographiques*", François Perea observes the vocal and verbal manifestations of emotion in pornographic film dialogues, their links in the distribution of actancial and

interactional roles and their role in the staging of seemingly realistic affects. His objective is to show how the enunciative dimension of the pathemic system functions to understand and define one of the most important phenomena in pornography - how to involve and draw in the spectator which as we know is aimed at providing sexual satisfaction. Dominique Maingueneau has chosen to work in an area currently without works of discursive analysis - amateur audition videos. In "*Le casting, lieu d'autolégitimation du dispositif pornographique*", he uses a popular series called *Les castings de Philippe Lhermite* to reveal the laws of this genre and how the exchange's interactional construction serves to legitimize pornography.

- 20 The second part of this thematic issue, "*Des corps sociaux et politiques*", focuses more on bodies -particularly those of women or teenagers - from a critical standpoint. The authors show that the discourse of pornography is often shot through with naturalized negative value judgements which confer upon them, in the common sense of the term, a kind of negative ontology for the general public and even for more informed circles such as the media or in research. In "*Sluts and goddesses. Discours de sexpertes entre pornographie, sexologie et prostitution*", Marie-Anne Paveau shows that there is an interaction of ideas between the discourse of sex work and that of individuals' sexual well-being or concerns. In an exploratory study of an area yet to be examined by discourse analysis researchers, she shows how this interaction, if considered in political and social terms from a non-moral standpoint, produces effects related to learning and *empowerment*. Stephanie Kunert's work here is from an analogous standpoint and deals with feminist pornography in an article called "*Du métadiscours pornographique à la métapornographie féministe*". She shows that, feminist pornography contains its own defining discourse which appertains to a metadiscourse because of the very fact that it is feminist and because it deconstructs the generally heterosexual and heterosexist codes of the mainstream pornography industry. As such she is able to refer to a "metapornography". François-Ronan Dubois uses a different corpus which has also been the subject of little research - photographic blogs - to look in detail at the nagging question of the general sexualization of society and the supposedly pornographic character of media images, particularly in advertising. In "*Les blogs, de la photographie de mode à la photographie pornographique*", he highlights the discursive and technical phenomena which regiment the contexts of the publication of images and shows that the phenomenon of sexualization is regulated or even counterbalanced by an active reorganization of what is seen on the internet - a profoundly dynamic universe which leaves little to chance. The last article of this issue works along similar lines. "*La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'indécent*" is written by a clinical psychoanalyst for adolescents who particularly focuses on the passage into sexuality of teenage boys and girls who often encounter mainly film pornography at this time of their lives. Eric Bidaud formulates the innovative and counter-doxic hypothesis of sexuality being masked by pornography in the sense of the creation of its face which is contrary to the relatively homogenous discourse of French psychoanalysts who tend to view the pornographic "model" in a critical, sometimes even horrified, manner.
- 21 The works presented therefore open up new fields, lines of questioning and viewpoints. This is essential for the subject at hand - pornography and its discourse - but also for the disciplinary approaches represented, namely discourse analysis, information and communication sciences, literature and psychoanalysis which all now possess established theoretical corpora, methodologies and legitimacies. The purveyors of such approaches can only gain from thought about realities which present a fertile dual singularity - the

illegitimate strangeness or strange illegitimacy of pornography incites researchers to visit fields where thought itself about the object remains to be invented.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ambroise B., 2003, « Quand pornographier, c'est insulter : théorie des actes de parole, pornographie et féminisme », *Cités*, 15, p. 79-85.
- Athanassopoulos V., Dejean G., dirs, 2013, « Pornographies : entre l'animal et la machine », *Proteus*, 5. Online : <http://www.revue-proteus.com/Proteus05.pdf>. Accessed 31/05/14.
- Attwood F., Smith C., 2014, « Porn Studies : An Introduction », *Porn Studies*, 1, vol. 1-2, pp. 1-6.
- Bourlez F., Gaudin A., coords, 2013, « Penser le porno aujourd'hui », *nonfiction.fr*. Online : http://www.nonfiction.fr/article-6604-dossier__penser_le_porno_aujourd'hui.htm. Accessed 31/05/14.
- Courbet D., 2012, *Féminismes et pornographie*, Paris, Éd. La Musardine.
- Damian-Gaillard B., 2012, « Entretiens avec des producteurs de la presse pornographique : des rencontres semées d'embûches... », *Sur le journalisme, About journalism, Sobre jornalismo*, 1, vol. 1, p. 84-95, oct. Accès : <http://surlejournalisme.com/rev/index.php/slj/article/view/12>. Accessed 31/05/14.
- Delorme W., 2011, « Pornographie féministe : fin d'un oxymore », *Ravages*, 6, « Mauvais genres », repris sur <http://www.foleffet.com/Pornographie-feministe-fin-d-un>. Accessed 31/05/14.
- Dubois F.-R., 2014, *Introduction aux Porn Studies*, Bruxelles, Éd. Les Impressions nouvelles.
- Goulemot J.-M., 1994, *Ces livres qu'on ne lit que d'une main. Lecture et lecteurs de livres pornographiques au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Minerve.
- Kunert S., 2009, « Femmes et pornographes ? », entretiens croisés avec les réalisatrices Maria Beatty, Émilie Jouvét, Catherine Corringer et Shu Lea Cheang, *Genre, sexualité et société*, 1. Online : <http://gss.revues.org/823>. Accessed 31/05/14.
- 2013, « Paroles et images de femmes désirantes dans le mouvement dit sex-positif : un geste de réécriture », pp. 197-218, in : Boisclair I., Dussault-Frenette C., dirs, *Femmes désirantes. Art, littérature, représentations*, Québec, Éd. du Remue-ménage.
- Lacan J., 1971-1972, *Le Séminaire*, livre XIX, « Ou pire », Paris, Éd. Le Seuil, 2011.
- Maingueneau D., 2007, *La littérature pornographique*, Paris, A. Colin.
- Loubradou E., 2013, *Porno chic et indécence médiatique, contribution interdisciplinaire portant sur les enjeux communicationnels et socio-juridiques des publicités sexuelles en France et aux États-Unis*, thèse en sciences de l'information et de la communication, université Paul Sabatier-Toulouse 3.
- Odello L., 2014, « Pour une autre pornographie », *Rue Descartes*, 79. Online : http://www.ruedescartes.org/numero_revue/2013-3-pour-une-autre-pornographie/. Accessed 31/05/14.
- Ogien R., 2003, *Penser la pornographie*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France.

- Paveau M.-A., 2014, *Le discours pornographique*, Paris, Éd. La Musardine.
- Perea F., 2006, « Les manifestations vocales et verbales pendant l'acte sexuel. Une désactivation de la chaîne signifiante », *Synapse*, 223, pp. 31-37.
- 2012, « Les sites pornographiques par le menu : pornotypes linguistiques et procédés médiatiques », *Genre, sexualité & société* 7. Online : <http://gss.revues.org/index2395.html>. Accessed 31/05/14.
- 2013, « Les échanges dans les forums de masturbation internationaux : relations et scripts autour de l'acte corporel intime virtuel », pp. 115-138, in : Dervin F., dir., *Relations intimes interculturelles*, Paris, Éd. des Archives contemporaines.
- Rubin G., 1984, « Penser le sexe », pp. 135-234, in : Rubin G., *Surveiller et jouir. Anthropologie politique du sexe*, trad. de l'américain par F. Bolter, Paris, Éd. Epel, 2010.
- Taormino T. et al, eds, 2013, *The Feminist Porn Book. The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, New York, The Feminist Press.
- Williams L., 1989, *Hard Core. Power, Pleasure and the « Frenzy of the Visible »*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- 2004, *Porn studies*, Durham, Duke University Press.

NOTES

1. Here are a few examples: in the printed and online press, *Les 400 culs* (a blog by the daily paper, *Liberation*), *Rue69* (blog by pureplayer *Rue89*) or *Sexpress* (blog by the weekly paper *L'Express*); on the radio, *Tous les chats sont gris* (a daily night-time feature on France Inter), *Classé X* (a monthly feature on Radio Campus Lille); on television, the *Journal du hard* (monthly magazine on Canal +) which covers pornography or the "Sexo" feature in the *Magazine de la santé* which covers sex from a health perspective.
2. See the summary report by Emilie Landais which follows this presentation.
3. For anti- and pro-pornography arguments within the feminist framework, see, for example, Bruno Ambroise (2003), David Courbet (2012) and Wendy Delorme (2011).
4. As is often the case when labels are translated, there has been discussion on the form of the expression - *études pornographiques* or *études de la pornographie*? The former has been criticized for the ambiguity of the adjective as *pornographic* may both serve to characterize the noun ("of pornographic nature") and as a relational adjective ("about" or "on pornography"). However no-one has ever thought of disputing the use of the word *literary* in *literary studies*, *cultural* in *cultural studies* or *visual* in *visual studies*, etc. We have therefore opted for a straightforward acceptance of the polysemous nature of language and thus use *études pornographiques* without any fastidious lexico-semantic 'meta-caution'.
5. We shall also see that studies are beginning in the field of psychoanalysis even though these are currently at the embryonic stage.

AUTHORS

MARIE-ANNE PAVEAU

Pléiade

Université Paris 13

F-93000

ma.paveau@orange.fr

FRANÇOIS PEREA

Praxiling

Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

F-34000

francois.perea@univ-montp3.fr